Never Let It Starve

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Never Let It Starve

by northern

Summary

Will Finds Out.

Notes

Thank you to damnslippyplanet for beta!

There is now a podfic of this fic, here, by ventusprinceps. Please go listen if you enjoy podfic - it's really well made!

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1

Will is walking through a dark forest. It's not a living forest, because there are no sounds of startled birds, animals moving around or even leaves rustling. In fact, there aren't any leaves, because Will can see the contours of branches covered in snow by the very faint light of the stars. It's not cold, even though he's barefoot, and the branches don't bar his way. They're just there when he looks at them.

There is a sense of urgency, but Will doesn't know what there is to be urgent about. He should keep moving, though. He sweeps through the clumps of trees, smoothly, with no snow falling on him, and the branches eventually thin out. He can see a remote light ahead, larger than a star. It might be the moon. He brushes the final branches away, and the blue-white shapes of snow covered ground slope away in front of him in waves, frozen and silent, and he sees, not the moon, but a house. He knows this shape. It's his own house, lit from within by several lamps. As he watches, the luminescence of it grows and the shape of the house changes, until it's his house, but also the moon. This makes him, not alarmed, but… puzzled, and a little bit sad. He stands there, and the moon/house stays where it is, and he knows he can stay at the edge of the woods and watch it, but if he tries to come closer, his house will disappear completely into the moon and eventually the moon will set and he will be left alone in the dark.

He stands there, gazing longingly, wishing he could be inside his house, in his bed.

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It's muddy. It's been raining for hours every day for days now, and Will spends several minutes wiping his dogs down, getting all the dirt off their paws and legs (and in Buster's case his whole body) before he lets them back into the house, one at a time. They wait patiently for their turn by the door while Will goes through two old towels and one rag before he's done. He locks the door behind Eunice who is last and watches her trot away toward the stairs, her only goal a nap after their morning adventure.

Will is wet too. His parka only does so much, keeping the rain out, and after the walk and getting the dogs clean he is sweaty and uncomfortable. The drive to work is slow, not many people willing to speed in the rain, even though it's almost stopped by the time he turns into his assigned parking. He pulls his parka off while he walks through the hallway to his office and Jenkins from DITU ducks out of the way as he passes him.

"Hey Graham! Watch where you're going!" he shouts after him.

Will doesn't answer. His thoughts are already full of today's schedule. He has office hours until two, and then two lectures in a row. One on general forensics for the new students and then a smaller workshop thing for electives. This is his longest day this week. His students

are generally good about not asking too many questions, but he's not looking forward to the workshop, which is bound to be full of specialized questions calling for his opinions. He's not good with those. He tends to say either too much or too little. His psychiatrist tells him he has interesting things to say, but a lot of the time when he talks about things he hasn't planned out in advance, other people fall silent and stare at him. It happens with alarming regularity.

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After work, Will takes on the long drive to Baltimore. It's where his psychiatrist has his office. He also lives there, and has in fact invited Will to his house a few times. Will never stayed long, because although Doctor Lecter is a fantastic cook, Will doesn't feel at home with all the opulent furniture. It's overwhelming, like a glossy lacquer covering everything and smoothing out every single imperfection. Will doesn't understand how Doctor Lecter can stand it.

Doctor Lecter's office is better. It doesn't look like any other psychiatrist's office Will has ever been in (and he's been in quite a few) but it suits this particular man — high ceilinged, full of books, dark, rich color everywhere. The office has a loft, where most of the volumes are. When Will doesn't feel like sitting down opposite Doctor Lecter's sharply interested gaze he sometimes climbs up there, continuing the conversation while browsing book titles. Will gets the feeling Doctor Lecter has a very rich inner life, and the titles on the spines of all those books certainly reflect that. It's possible it was his first visit to the office that made Will stick with this psychiatrist. Their introduction wasn't the best. Jack Crawford, his boss, had been trying to get him to go out in the field again and brought out a pet psychiatrist to help him convince Will that this would be a good idea. It hadn't worked, of course — Will is much too stubborn and knows himself too well — but the pet psychiatrist, who had turned out not to be very much Jack's pet at all, had stuck.

Will takes a breath or two before he crosses the street and enters the old brick building. No matter how many times he comes here, and it has been at least once a week, sometimes more, since they started two years ago, it still makes him feel a little anxious. This feeling passes as soon as he walks through the waiting room and Doctor Lecter ushers him into the actual office. There is a peculiar stillness in there. A specific kind of… safety. Doctor Lecter smiles slightly as they sit down — all his expressions are slight and Will hates him a tiny bit for that ability.

"Did anything interesting happen this week?" Doctor Lecter asks him. "You look rested."

"Oh, nothing much," Will says. "It's been raining a lot. The dogs found a carcass day before yesterday."

Doctor Lecter tilts his head. "Deer?" he asks.

"Nah, a boar, actually. Or at least that's what it looked like. It was weeks old, though. I brought a piece of it in to work, for the students."

"I imagine that was interesting," Doctor Lecter says.

"It was supposed to be a lecture, but since a good sample of what I was talking about kind of fell into my lap, I turned it into a practical. They were on an autopsy segment anyway, might as well let them have a look at some well developed parasites."

"Some parasites are quite beautiful," Doctor Lecter agrees. "I made sketches of some practical examples when I studied Medicine in France. I may still have them somewhere."

Doctor Lecter has a remarkably well-ordered small archive of his sketches. Will can't imagine he'd ever not know where any one of them is, but he spends a good half hour going through anatomy sketches with him, admiring what is indeed several drawings of examples of different parasites embedded in what looks like living flesh, clamped to provide good access or simply cut open, the insects in their various stages of development peeking through. Will usually has good talks with Doctor Lecter, but it's been some time since he's seen pictures drawn with such obvious care and enthusiasm for the subject. It reminds him of crime scene photos, somehow. He compliments the doctor on his talent of composition and tells him he'd love to see more of his art sometime. He leaves his appointment in a great mood.

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After sessions with Doctor Lecter Will usually buys something and eats it in his car while driving back. Tonight it was a burger with extra fries, and despite wiping himself and the steering wheel off the best he could afterward, his dogs spend more time trying to lick his fingers than actually looking for places to pee on their walk in the dark. It's windy, but there hasn't been any rain since lunch. Buster manages to find a patch of mud anyway.

Will is not any kind of active field profiler, but he likes to puzzle over cases that seem to be getting nowhere. His boss has given him a close to full access account in the hopes of someday tempting him to come go over crime scenes with him. Will hasn't so far, but sometimes he sends emails with impressions he gets from crime scene photos. A recent case, only a few weeks old but stalled, describes a woman murdered underneath her bed in the house where she lived alone. Signs were found that someone spent the night under the bed two days after the body was found, despite the fact that the house had been closed off, but the tissue samples found on the floor, in unusual quantity, seem to prove difficult to analyse.

The pictures are high quality as usual. Will enlarges the ones of the pool of blood without the victim, and then a couple of the ones that show most of the victim's body in situ. He scratches Charlie's head while he tabs between them, thinking. His immersion is not as intense as it used to be in person, but there are hints of loneliness, confusion and despair, especially when he includes some shots of the room's interior. He's probably not going to be able to help the investigation on this one. Confusion and despair aren't rare in certain types of killers. It's interesting about the tissue samples though, and their size. Reading the preliminary analysis on them, they seem like more the kind of thing you'd get from a zombie than from a human

being. Perhaps the killer was trying to open the skull, but didn't have the tools for it. It did look as though the goal has been to tear the victim's face off.

Confusion and despair — tearing this woman's face off. Will imagines it, pulling the woman underneath the bed, holding her still while she screams and gurgles as he slits her mouth wider, wider, scrabbling at the edges of the wound with his fingers to open it up even more, to… get inside? But nothing comes of it, his goal isn't reached and eventually (the woman still beneath him, dead or dying) he leaves, not having achieved what he was after.

Will blinks. Confused is a good word for it, yes. There's only thwarted purpose there. Will looks through the case again to see if any other similar attacks have been discovered, but there's nothing. He'd expect the killer to try again with this result, but maybe something has happened to him.

Will makes himself a cup of tea, three of the dogs following him into the kitchen. It's Winston, Ruth and Eunice who still aren't convinced that Will only feeds them at meal time. They haven't lived with him for long enough yet. Will ignores them, and when that doesn't discourage Winston and Ruth, points to the living room and clicks his tongue sharply. They know this one. It's one of the ones Will spends most time on, teaching it to any new dog that comes to live with him. "Go lie down." Winston casts him a final reproachful look and leaves the kitchen last to let Will finish making his tea without dogs underfoot.

It's late, but he's in a strange mood. He doesn't want to go to bed yet. Instead he brings his tea back to his laptop and brings up the old cases. The Chesapeake Ripper ones. The pictures of these aren't as high quality as those from newer cases, but Will has no problem recreating them in his mind. He can only get so far, though. Take this one, for example, from six years ago: The body was found in progressively smaller pieces and there are dutiful pictures of each of the parts, even the ones that are tiny cubed pieces of the victim's lungs. Some of the body is missing, as is always the case in Ripper murders. In this one it was parts of the thighs and the kidneys, which was surprisingly hard to puzzle out, since the body was in so many pieces. Will drifts into the images of it with grateful familiarity, thinking about parting joints with exact precision, imagines starting the process with the victim alive, cutting off pieces that won't kill him fast, adjusting the restraints as he goes. He can never get a sense of motive off the Ripper cases, or much emotion. There is usually a sense of doing exactly what he wants to, though. A quiet calm. A sense of fulfilment. He rests in the perfection of that case for a long time, flicking through the pictures, then closing his eyes and seeing the process, then going back to the pictures.

Afterwards his mind feels calmer but now there's an other restlessness in his body he knows he can kill with a drink or two. He downs two half-full tumblers of whiskey in rapid succession and goes to bed. He jerks off, thinking of nothing.

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Will is entering a body on a morgue table. He is folding the edges of a chest wound back and stepping into it. The overhead light source only illuminates the wound and the room outside

the table is lost in darkness. There is plenty of room next to one of the lungs (the ribs have been broken and are helpfully folded away). The slick walls of lung and liver are unbroken, but there is an unoccupied space between them that he slides into. After a while, the outside room disappears and there are only shifting wet organs around him, the walls of the body making space for him easily. As he lies there in the darkness, he notices a squirming noise, like tiny thin limbs scrabbling for purchase. He turns his head toward the source of the noise, pressing his ear against a slick surface, bulging slightly. Something is moving in there. He probes with his fingers gently against the wall, and he can feel the mass of something, or several small somethings, just behind it. He wants to see what it is. It's dark, but if he can get through the wall, he knows he will be able to see. Will fumbles with his fingers over the slick surface until he finds a seam in the flesh. He gently coaxes it apart, and it opens for him slowly. Nestled in a glow just inside are several cozy grubs, white and tan, sliding against one another. One of them has little spindly legs and is crawling over the others toward him. It squirms against his hand, slipping between his fingers. It bumbles its blind head against the skin of his palm, tiny mandibles opening and closing.

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Will comes in to work to get some writing done. He owes an article to Law and Human Behavior and sometimes it's easier to actually get the work done if he's in his office when he writes. The risk that brings is students undeterred by the sign on the door stating that anything they want to ask him can be done by email. Also, colleagues. And at times, Jack Crawford.

Office policy is to keep his door open unless he has a visitor, for improved transparency or something like that. Will isn't really interested in what is decided in the staff meetings, as long as he is allowed to do his work when he wants to do it. For some reason, they let him keep his own hours. His lectures are always well attended, so Will assumes the way he teaches works for everyone who has a say.

Will gets two pages into his text about forensics in difficult weather conditions before Jack Crawford strides into the room, leaning over his desk, his hands on either side of Will's laptop.

"We might have him," Jack says.

Will pulls his laptop closer, irritated. He glances up at Jack and then away. He doesn't like staring people in the face, but it's a little awkward when they're standing right on top of him looking down at him, if he doesn't acknowledge them in some way.

"We need you, Will," Jack says. "Do you remember the BSHCI inmate who escaped last week?"

"Since when do you need me to catch Doctor Chilton's leftovers?" Will says, but his blood runs cold. There's something more. He can feel it.

"I know for a fact that you remember the Chesapeake Ripper," Jack continues. "Right before Abel Gideon went into custody two years ago, the Ripper went dormant. Last night he may have become active again."

"Are you saying… You're not saying that Abel Gideon is the Chesapeake Ripper," Will says slowly. He can't be. Will has even been to study the man in question, together with Alana Bloom and several others attached to Quantico.

"This points in that direction," Jack says. "Doctor Chilton is very hopeful. Will, we need you to come look at the scene. No one but you has what we need for this."

"No…" Will says, his mind still racing with thoughts and impressions of Gideon coupled with impressions he's had of Ripper cases. They don't match up. It can't be.

"You've studied the Chesapeake Ripper cases more than anyone else we have, and you have your…" Jack waves his hand in the air.

"What, my party trick?" Will says. He hasn't been on an actual live crime scene in person for years now. But if there's even a small chance that the Ripper is active again, that he could experience a new murder and maybe get further into the mind of this killer… A chance of understanding him better. "No, " he says, trying to sound firm. "There's a reason why I don't do that anymore."

"You do it every week, with the cold cases," Jack protests.

"It's not the same!" Will closes his laptop, hoping it'll save the text he's written. "It's not the same at all," he continues, turning his chair away from the desk, out from under Jack's massive presence hanging above him. "I look at pictures, I get impressions — not the same as reliving the actual murders."

Jack comes around Will's desk, standing in front of his chair, towering over him again. "We need you," he repeats.

Will doesn't like Jack's tactics. They're effective, but crude. That he's expecting Will to fold just because Will has less body mass than him speaks volumes about how desperately Jack wants him to do just that. It makes Will want to resist him, just because. He stands up, which makes Jack take a step back to avoid bumping into him. It's a tiny thing, but it helps.

"I'll think about it," he says. "Like I said, there's a reason why I don't do that."

"But isn't it worth it?" Jack says. His voice doesn't do pleading well. It comes out more like an order. Everything he says comes out as a deep, booming thing. "If we could finally catch him?"

"I'll sleep on it," Will says, gathering up his parka and shoving his laptop into his bag. He'll have to finish writing his article at home. Or in a café. Or anywhere else but here.

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On the way out from the building, he runs into Alana Bloom. Doctor Bloom has helped Jack solve several serial killer cases. She doesn't have Will's problem with being at the actual sites, but then, their approaches to profiling are very different.

"Going home, Will?"

Will stops half way out through the sliding doors and turns to her. "I couldn't get my writing done in there, I need to be somewhere else."

She smiles a small, dry smile. Her coat and lipstick both are very red. She really is beautiful. "Jack get to you?"

"Have you seen it?"

She nods, not pretending she doesn't know what he's talking about. "We're pretty sure it's him."

The door makes an attempt to close, and Will moves just inside to avoid it. He's anxious to get out of the building, but the temptation of more information keeps him on the threshold. "How exactly are you sure?"

She glances around, but the only other person in the lobby right now is the security guard further in by the elevators. "The composition," she says. "It's… artistic. Look, you should come see it."

Will leans his head against the glass surface of the doors, having closed again. "Not you too. You know that could backfire. A lot."

"It's been years," she says seriously. "Personally, I think you could risk it. You have a lot more tools in your arsenal to defend yourself with nowadays. Doctor Lecter has been good for you, hasn't he?"

Will sometimes forgets Doctors Lecter and Bloom are colleagues and acquainted, and as such may discuss professional cases. Probably not on a detailed level, since Will is reasonably sure they're both much too professional to gossip. At least he hopes they don't. He's certainly talked quite a bit about Alana with Doctor Lecter, a year ago when he had that debilitating crush on her. It still twinges a bit, but she's in a relationship now, and it was never more than a wistful longing, anyway.

"Yeah. I don't know. It feels like a lot to risk." Part of Will wants it very much. He's spent years looking at the Chesapeake Ripper cases from afar, never being able to get close to him. He's not like anyone else Will has ever studied. His methods are… unique. Breathtaking.

Will turns away, starting back out through the door. He has to back away first, to make it open again, which brings him closer to Alana. "I'll think about it," he mutters over his shoulder and hurries outside as soon as the doors react.

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His laptop didn't save the last paragraph of what he'd written, but it's not too bad, he can fix this. Except as soon as he's home, he finds excuses to do anything but finish his text. He takes the dogs for a long walk (it's back to raining, but he doesn't mind, it complements his mood). He goes through his fly tying supplies, noting that he needs to order more nano silk. He's almost out of brown. He spends a long time browsing the website of his favorite supplier. They have new beads. He spends a little more money than he'd planned to.

Chapter 2

Will dreads going into work the next day. He locks his car in the parking lot and stays there outside of it, staring in at the seats for a long time. There are magazines in the passenger footwell, and a burger wrapper.

When he turns away and starts for the entrance, he sees Doctor Lecter's car pull up, parking closer to the building than Will did. He didn't know Doctor Lecter had business here today, but Will knows he sometimes consults for the BAU on specialties, especially when they have something Doctor Chilton is unable to puzzle out. Which is often, Will's mind comments darkly. He doesn't like Doctor Chilton. He tried to have Will committed once, years ago.

"Doctor Lecter," he hails the man as he steps out of his beautiful Bentley.

Doctor Lecter glances toward him, smiling slightly in recognition as he locks his car and adjusts the fall of his coat. "Will," he says pleasantly. "What a coincidence. Shall we walk in together?"

"I must insist that you call me by my first name," Doctor Lecter says as they walk in step to the entrance. "I've asked you before."

Will feels absurdly reprimanded. "I'm sorry… Hannibal," he stammers, the name a little strange on his tongue. "It's just that I felt that our professional relationship…"

"Nonsense," Doctor Lecter, Hannibal, says warmly. "I feel that we're becoming much better friends lately, and in the light of that, titles are entirely unnecessary."

"Of course," Will agrees, after a pause. He thinks about their interactions. It's true — their sessions have been more like conversations lately, and especially the one two days ago, when they rifled through the pages and pages of Doctor Lecter's beautiful art together. Will is generally not good at things like friendship, but Hannibal is right. That's more like something two people who enjoy each other's company would do.

"So," he says, "why are you here today? Did Jack call you in?"

"I would assume we are both here on the same errand," Hannibal says with a wry look at him.

"Yes."

Will walks in silence for a while. They enter through the sliding doors and the security guard inspects their IDs before letting them through to the elevators. Hannibal pushes the button and stands there waiting in silence.

"I feel a little torn about it," Will admits.

Hannibal glances at him. "Because of your experiences at crime scenes a few years ago," he says.

"Yes." Will sighs deeply and enters the elevator, Hannibal following him.

"But you want to see, don't you," Hannibal comments with a knowing smile.

His words strike something inside of Will, something that makes his stomach swoop like he's at the top of a great height, looking down. He closes his eyes for a moment. "Yes," he says softly. "Yes, I do want to see."

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"Will. Doctor Lecter." Jack greets them both is the same clipped manner. He is busy assembling material for what looks like a presentation of a case. Will sees a glimpse of a picture of a stone wall, rough and chipped, stained with something, on the big screen at the front of the room before it's closed down.

"I have the material I want your opinion on in the conference room across the hall," Jack says to Doctor Lecter. "I can't let you bring it with you, I'm afraid."

"That is perfectly alright," Hannibal replies, shrugging out of his coat. Will feels vaguely abandoned when he leaves the room.

Jack types for a few more minutes and then looks at Will. "Are you coming with me back to the crime scene?" he asks. "I could really use you there. After this, we move the body. We only kept it there this long for you."

Will is suddenly sweating a little, his heart thundering in his chest. "Yeah. Yes," he forces himself to say. "I want to help. I want to see."

***

Walking through the doorway into the stone outbuilding brings with it the instant awareness that there is a dead person inside. Will hasn't smelled it in a long time apart from rare visits to the morgue, but there is no mistaking what it is. It's pungent enough that the victim probably died in here and wasn't transported after death, but it depends on what the… killer, he can't call him the Ripper, not yet. It depends on what the killer did with the body afterward. He fingers his service weapon.

The body is posed on a table, close to the wall but not right up against it. When Will first sees it, the first thing he thinks is eyes. Too many eyes. He'd known it would be unusual. Alana's and Jack's little hints had prepared him for that at least, but this is something that makes his heart beat inside his chest with a painful hope.

He walks right up to the table, ignoring the stench as best as he can. It's… original is one word for it. Maybe the best word. The killer has opened the body up, slit it open in many different places. He's created hollows in the flesh and placed what looks like white-ish rocks inside. Mostly the flesh itself holds the stones where they are, but in some places with more elaborate formations placed in patterns like mosaics the killer has used clamps to make sure everything stays where it should be. Will is no expert on geology, but that might be quartz. The stone glitters in the crime scene lighting. It's like many, many eyes watching him. It's alien, and beautiful. It's the Ripper.

"You want to try it?" Jack asks from behind him.

Will has forgotten he was even there. This feels like something just for him. Something personal. No one else needs to be involved. He nods distractedly.

"Okay, everybody out!" Jack shouts. "Yes, all the way out, outside!"

People move, and their footsteps and voices finally die away. The lighting stays. And the display. Will looks at the many eyes with their shallow, glittering depths. The body's actual eyes have been removed, but not filled in with quartz. Those eyes are unimportant. They are gelatinous, stained blobs, discarded on the floor, helpfully marked by the techs with chunky strips of reflective tape to avoid anyone stepping on them. Will thinks they needn't have bothered — the Ripper has no need for them, and neither does Will. This is a message for him, personally, to *see*. But not with his eyes.

Will lets this sink into his mind. The Chesapeake Ripper has sent him a message. It makes his blood run cold. How does he know who I am? That I would be here? Why did he bother? For me? There is a tiny splinter of pleasure at this last thing, it's *for me*, that he quashes fast with a few deep breaths, the tainted air coating his tongue, the back of his throat.

He looks at the twisted body of the victim again, noting the way limbs have been broken in some places to make better hosts for the inserted eyes. It's a man, naked. There is little fluid, blood or otherwise, marring the display.

The eyes watch him coolly, waiting. They draw him in. He closes his eyes.

He empties the room of all the things added there afterward: the lights, the marking tape, all the equipment and supplies the forensics team brought with them. The stone walls of the room are bare, worn and old. The table was moved — it was against the other wall. The body, after hours of work, done by… someone. Someone pleased, preparing a gift.

There is nothing else, and Will turns time back further. This is an abandoned building, far from the road. The car that brought them must have left tracks, wait, no. The gravel crunching under the wheels, rolling to a stop. The engine cutting off, lights disappearing. It's dark. The man is safely tied in the trunk, and he just needs to prepare the space. He opens the car door, anticipating the night's work, and…

Nothing.

Will opens his eyes again, staring at the eyes in front of him. They're blurring, but he doesn't bother correcting his focus. There's something there. He'd hoped to get more, but it's the Ripper. Will gets a lot more from any random serial killer he encounters through crime scene photos on his laptop screen than from this, being in the room where the Ripper prepared his gift to Will.

This trips him up again. He can't concentrate. The Chesapeake Ripper cares enough about one random profiler to give him a gift. It's… Will doesn't know what to think about that. Not at all. No.

"I think he was pleased, preparing this," he tells Jack outside. "There's not a lot, but he was very… pleased, yes."

"This is the Ripper, in your opinion?" Jack presses.

Will breathes out, a long breath. "Yes," he says. "This is him."

"So Abel Gideon could conceivably be the Chesapeake Ripper. It fits with the timeline."

Will makes a face at that. It feels wrong. "I don't know," he says. "I don't… I don't think he could make this. Abel Gideon seems cruder than this."

He falls silent. He only talked with Gideon for a few times, but him? The Ripper? It seems sacrilegious somehow. He's not refined enough, not capable of the elevated art the Ripper produces.

Jack looks at him searchingly. Will looks away.

"Are you sure there's nothing else?" Jack asks, his voice slow and doubtful.

"Oh," Will adds. "The blood. Where's the blood?"

"The blood?" Jack looks at a loss.

"The victim wasn't dead when he was brought here. Not even very hurt, I don't think. There's not a lot of blood in there. So where did he put it?" Will gestures to the small outbuilding. There aren't any other buildings close by.

"There's nothing else here, nothing we have discovered," Jack says, "and my team have gone through everything within two hundred yards."

Will looks at the gravel road, not wide enough for two cars to pass without going out on the precarious shoulder. He thinks about the crunch of it under the Ripper's car wheels as he rolls away back out into the night, everything he'd planned accomplished, just as he planned it, the plastic jugs in his backseat sloshing, full and heavy.

"Maybe he took it with him," he says, his gaze following the road back over the field until it's covered by trees.

It's not until he's in his car again, alone, that he realizes he never told Jack that this display was meant for Will. An invitation to see more. Further.

He drives faster.

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Will isn't really sure why he doesn't just go home — maybe it's that he feels he needs to write something down. Collect the pieces of the case with pictures and notes that he is sure will already be available in the secure server case folder. Now that he thinks about it, he's a little amazed at himself that he managed not to look at those before he went, but then he hadn't been sure that it was what he'd hoped… feared… no, hoped it would be.

It was *for him*. It's all he can think about as he walks toward his office. He doesn't really see anything but all those eyes meeting his, so blank, betraying so little, which is why he is stopped short by someone seemingly appearing out of nowhere right in front of him. He jerks to a halt, barely avoiding crashing into Doctor Lecter. He's still here.

Will freezes for a second, suddenly filled with a sense of inexplicable dread, but then he meets Hannibal's eyes and he's just looking at Will, slightly quizzical.

"Sorry, sorry," Will stammers. "Wasn't looking where I…" He breaks off, suddenly annoyed at himself. He takes a deep breath. "I need to talk. I don't want to wait until tomorrow. Do you have time for that? For me?"

Hannibal looks at him, like he's studying Will's face looking for something, and after the space of a breath his face does something that looks like relaxing. A miniscule smoothing out of his features. "I believe I can make time for you, Will. Has something upset you?"

Will steps around Hannibal in the corridor. He walks the few steps left to his door. "Could you…?"

"Of course," Hannibal says and follows him into his office.

Will shuts the door. He has company. He's allowed. He laughs to himself.

Hannibal looks the room over. Will is abruptly aware of the difference between their places of work. Will's office isn't big. It has two windows facing the parking lot, but the blinds are always drawn. His desk has marks on it. He pulls his visitor's chair closer to the desk, for Hannibal to sit in if he feels like it. Will doesn't feel like sitting anywhere.

"What happened?" Hannibal asks matter-of-factly.

"What do you do when someone you had no idea even knew who you are gives you something… something important?" Will asks, turning toward the blind windows.

He hears Hannibal settle into the chair behind him, his clothes rustling. "I think that depends on whether you enjoyed your gift or not," he says.

"That's the problem," Will says. "I don't know."

"You don't know whether you enjoyed something or not?" Hannibal asks, sounding curious.

Will turns back around, leaning on his desk into half sitting. "I don't know whether I *should* enjoy it," he says. He stares at his office door.

"Morals are irrelevant," Hannibal comments.

"When are morals irrelevant?" Will asks, startled.

"In pure pleasure, there is no consideration of morals or ethics. Your enjoyment of something has no impact on your personality, Will."

"The Chesapeake Ripper knows who I am," Will says. He glances at Hannibal. He seems unperturbed.

"Does this frighten you?" Hannibal asks.

"I'm not sure," Will says, trying to puzzle out his own feelings. "I feel… flattered?" he tries. "He made that for me. I know he did. I was… It was like he saw me, and invited me to see him as well."

"A meeting of minds," Hannibal suggests.

"Yes. Or at least a first, brief brush. I couldn't get much detail."

Hannibal knows as much as anyone how Will's particular talent works. They've talked about it extensively. For some reason, even though Will has hated talking about the way his mind works with mental health professionals all through his life, Doctor Lecter has always been almost effortless to talk to. Sometimes it's so easy that it feels like talking to himself.

"I felt how pleased he was with what he was making," Will continues. "That everything went to plan. A little of how he got there. I think the victim was in the trunk while he set up." Will jams his fingers under his thighs and leans on them, trapping his hands. "I keep thinking about it as a gift."

"And what impact does this have in the murder investigation?"

"I didn't tell Jack," Will admits. "I'm just not sure if this is the kind of gift that requires any kind of reply. I'm not great at social niceties."

"I'm sure knowing you were there to see it is its own reward," Hannibal says.

Will thinks about this. To assume the Chesapeake Ripper knows Will has been out to see his work in person is… But that makes sense. If he cares enough about Will to create this

invitation, he cares enough to keep tabs on where he is. Possibly at any moment. That is… Will decides he doesn't need to think about that right now.

"I should change my notes for my next lecture," he says.

"Will you reference this latest crime scene, then? Show pictures?" Hannibal sounds neutral about this, not like he cares one way or the other.

"Yes." Will wasn't sure before, but now he is. "I want to talk about this."

"And Jack?" Hannibal asks.

"I want to talk about *certain aspects* of this," Will clarifies.

"Not the personal aspects, I assume," Hannibal says.

"No." That answer is easy. When he discovered he'd forgotten to tell Jack about the Ripper's apparent personal interest in Will his first instinct had been to take care of that with an email, or when he saw Jack next, but the more he thinks about it… After talking with Hannibal, he's decided not to. This feels intensely personal, and he wants to keep it that way if at all possible.

***

The dogs are restless. They keep padding to the other side of the room, or up or down the stairs, lying down only to get up again. It's much like the way Will is turning over in bed only to turn back on his other side after a few minutes. He can't sleep. His head is a jumble of reasons why a famous serial killer would want to open up a dialog with him.

When he finally does nod off, he wakes up after what feels like minutes, the cries of a dog in pain still ringing in his ears. He has to get up and go check on every one of his dogs to make sure it wasn't real. Most of them are asleep, although a couple stir and look at him like they're wondering if it's time to get up. It's not time to get up, he can see as much when he looks through his windows. Winston comes up behind him and nudges the back of his thighs. Will startles, then reaches down to pet him.

"It's nothing, boy," he whispers. "Just a dream."

When he gets back into bed he lies there for a long time, staring into the darkness.

Chapter 3

"These are exciting times. The Chesapeake Ripper is one of the great ones left for us to study. He has an extraordinary sense of style, of art. These… *tableaus* that he has showed us so far in his career are truly stunning, and this latest one, his first in more than two years, is no different."

"Professor Graham?" A student has raised her hand.

"Yes." Will barely makes her out in the gloom of the room. The main source of light is the projected images of the Chesapeake Ripper's catalog of work, behind Will's back, and the projector light is glaring right in front of him.

"Where is the blood in that last one?" She sounds puzzled. "I thought you said everything was done on the site. There's almost no blood at all in those pictures."

"Excellent," Will says. "Very good. I'm glad you mentioned it. My current theory is that he took the blood with him. As you know, in a typical Ripper killing he always takes one or more body parts or organs from the scene. I think in this one, it was the blood."

Another student waves his hand, but doesn't wait for Will to acknowledge him before speaking. "But what does he do with all of it? Make burnt offerings to Cthulhu?"

A spatter of nervous laughter goes through the room.

"The concept of trophies in the shape of body parts is not a new thing."

He doesn't say anything more after that, and the lecture ends by default after a minute or two, the students collecting their notes and bags and paper cups and dribbling out in fives and threes and singles. Will keeps his eyes on his own notes and occupies himself with the projector screen until they've all left.

No one knows what the Ripper does with his trophies. The most prevalent theory is of a storage room filled with glass jars where they're preserved like so many jars of jam. That doesn't explain the blood, though. There's been at least one other kill where the Ripper took the blood with him. Will has thought about unusual forms of art. The Ripper loves art — that is one of the few things Will is certain about when it comes to this killer. He is passionate about art in a way few people really are, and Will can imagine him using the things he takes in some kind of art project. He'd want to show his projects off, though, and there have never been any signs of something like that. Will suspects this is something they'll only ever truly know if they catch the Ripper. Maybe not even then.

***

The drive to Baltimore after work is slow, with traffic jams that sometimes slow Will to a crawl. He doesn't mind. He has plenty to think about. Maybe he should be scared, now that he thinks about it (and he can't stop thinking about it). He's not entirely sure he isn't. It's a situation most people wouldn't be aware of being in, being the focus of the interest of a serial killer. But that, on the other hand, feels awful. To assume he's the focus of this near mythological person feels… presumptuous as hell. It makes him cringe inside with embarrassment.

At the same time, he suspects most people would not spend hours thinking about whether the Chesapeake Ripper cares about them enough to want to communicate more or not. Most people would probably beg the FBI for a new identity. Or at least 24/7 police protection. Will, however, is not most people. He has studied this man, this phenomenon, for years now. The way Will's brain works makes it easy to see motivations and methods — a killer's design, so to speak. But the Ripper is different. Will still doesn't know why he picks the victims he does. He can barely make out anything of his methods.

This is why the eyes are so extraordinary. Will has never received anything as grand or important in his life. It's a little like a demi-god has chosen to reach out and touch his life, and Will is going to keep that, grab on to as much of it as he can. The touch might prove to be fire, or poison, and he probably shouldn't, but...

His phone rings.

"Will," Hannibal says when he answers, "Would it be too much trouble to ask you to come to my home instead this evening? My last appointment for the day cancelled and I'm making dinner. I hope you'll join me." Will is in fact Hannibal's last client this day of the week, but that's clearly not who he means.

"I suppose," Will says. He's not close enough to Baltimore proper yet to have to alter his route. "I'm not dressed for dinner." He always feels out of place in Hannibal's home. Once there were other people invited as well, and that was… awkward.

"Nonsense," Hannibal says, a warm chuckle in his voice. "It's just the two of us, and nothing special. Just something I wanted to make for you."

It almost sounds as if Hannibal has some other purpose than professional in inviting him. Almost as if… But Will is bad at these kinds of things. He's probably just misconstruing what Hannibal is saying.

"Sure!" he agrees while switching lanes in preparation for the alternate exit ramp he needs to take. "Sure, okay. I'll be there in… ten minutes?"

There's no reason he can't have dinner with his therapy.

***

The food Hannibal cooks and serves has been extraordinary and beautiful every time Will has been at his table. Tonight is no different.

"Loin, with a Cumberland sauce of red fruits," Hannibal announces as he sets the plate down in front of Will with a flourish. "I thought you'd appreciate something filling."

He produces a plate for himself and then pours the red sauce over the meat for Will before he sits down. Will is hungry, and he'd hoped for something at least vaguely traditional. This will hit the spot.

"It looks great," Will says with more enthusiasm than he's been able to work up for days. It's a relief to come to a set table, even if he's still not entirely comfortable with the gilded details of Doctor Lecter's dining room. The art pieces are nice, though. There are horns and bones from different animals hung on the walls in arrangements that provide a welcome contrast to the chandeliers and velvet draped windows. He's not sure if they were there before — he doesn't remember.

"There will be dessert," Hannibal says. "That's what I really wanted to make for you. But no dessert before dinner."

Will cuts himself a piece and dips it in the sauce. It really is red. He eats. "This is good," he comments. "And yeah, I'm usually not much for desserts, but I'm sure whatever you made will be good."

Hannibal smiles slightly. "I hope you'll enjoy it," he says.

They eat. Hannibal doesn't try to chitchat through the meal, and Will is grateful for it. However, there is an air of anticipation in the room, and Will can't tell if it's coming from himself or from Hannibal. Sometimes he has trouble separating his own emotions from those of others. With Doctor Lecter, it's never been much of a problem. Hannibal is very… contained. He doesn't project much, or whatever it is that people do that makes Will pick up on what they're feeling. That and how absurdly easy it is for him to talk to Hannibal has always been a constant. But now, there's something that has changed.

Will glances at Hannibal and reaches for his wine glass. He's aware he finds his therapist attractive, but he usually tries to suppress it. It's uncomfortable, in that he knows nothing will ever come from it. It's possible his attraction is what's created this slight tension he feels.

Hannibal brings them two small plates of halved, emptied out oranges decorated with berries and cinnamon sticks. There is a creamy brown mousse in the orange bowls. "Sanguinaccio Dolce," he says and smiles at Will.

It looks like chocolate mousse to Will, but he's not going to argue. He removes the stick of cinnamon to better reach with his spoon. Hannibal watches him as he tastes the dessert, as if it's very important that he likes it.

"Is it a kind of chocolate mousse?" Will asks. It's definitely chocolate, and creamy, but the… weight and depth of it isn't the same as any other chocolate he's tried.

"It's made with almond milk and blood," Hannibal says, smiling.

Will feels his eyebrows rise. It doesn't taste like blood. "For a dessert?" He drags his spoon through it, trying to see if the consistency betrays anything. He feels a vague unease, but makes himself put it away. There is nothing wrong with cooking with blood.

Hannibal has a spoonful of his own, the enjoyment of it evident on his face. "It's a traditional Italian recipe. It's roughly half blood, half milk. A few other things, including chocolate."

Will has another bite. He's never eaten anything with that much blood in it before, he doesn't think. "Blood and milk seem like fairytale ingredients. Not like they would work in reality. But this is good. It's not too sweet."

"They both have their own inherent kind of sweetness. They can both be symbols of abundance and fertility."

"Or they can be in opposition — pure and impure, life and death."

"But which is which?" Hannibal asks.

"Another question better answered by mythology or fiction," Will replies.

"What about your recent meeting with a creature of your own mythology? How did you find it? We hardly got into much detail yesterday."

Ah, the respite of a meal can only last so far. It seems it is time for the therapy portion of the evening. Will eats another spoonful of the chocolate thing. "I found it conflicting," he says.

"In what way?" Hannibal asks.

"I just feel like there is no possible way someone like the Chesapeake Ripper would have any kind of interest in me." He puts his spoon down. "There are others who do the same thing I do. Others who study him as well. I'm not special."

"I think perhaps you are underestimating yourself, Will," Hannibal says.

"I must be," Will says, "because it's quite evident he meant this display for me. That it was framed as an invitation." It still boggles his mind.

"You feel doubtful that he knows what he is doing?"

"No!" Will startles himself with the emphasis. "No. I simply don't know how to reply. What to do next. I want to learn more."

Hannibal leans back in his chair. He taps one of his fingers on the table slowly. "You are remarkable, Will," he finally says. "Unique. I see it more every day, and it's not unfathomable that others might see it as well. Perhaps this man is simply interested in what you might do next. I certainly am. I am often fascinated by you."

Will is suddenly aware of every part of his body and where it touches the chair, the floor, the table. He looks at Hannibal. Hannibal looks steadily back. Will takes an unsteady breath. "Thank you," he manages.

It doesn't feel like the right words, but Hannibal nods, as if that settles something. Will can't imagine what that might be, and all at once he doesn't want to ask, in case he's misconstruing again. This doesn't feel like any other time he's been here for dinner. But Hannibal picks up his spoon again and continues eating his blood and milk dessert, so Will does too. It's delicious.

***

"Abel Gideon is a good candidate for this," Jack says, rifling through the photos of the Eyes crime scene. "I wish you'd agree."

Will grimaces. "It's possible, but all things are possible."

"Decent coffee from this place isn't," Jack replies curtly, but his full attention isn't on Will. He's under pressure from something. Will can see it.

"Has Doctor Chilton been able to provide any hints on what Gideon's motivations might be in this situation?" he asks.

Jack looks at him. "You're the one who's studied the Ripper extensively enough that you should be able to guess."

"And Doctor Chilton has studied Gideon extensively, for two years. In person."

"Yes, yes," Jack says, sighing. "No, none of his guesses has led anywhere." He chooses a close-up of one of the more elaborate stone eyes and turns to the board on the wall behind him. He puts it with the other pictures of the body and the crime scene. There is a snapshot of the victim alive. Will glaces at the name: Ethan Ross, 42. Truck driver. Single. It doesn't feel relevant.

"You should go down to the lab," Jack says, waving at the door without looking at Will. "They've been working for hours. Maybe it will help."

***

The lab is familiar and should feel peaceful to Will, but the body Beverly and Brian are working on is the Ripper's gift. Will feels a little violated. He recognizes this as completely

illogical, but the further the investigation goes on, the more he sees it as his. His gift, his mystery, his mind.

Beverly is currently picking apart the Ripper's careful installation of rocks. She is prying them out with metal tongs and pincers, then placing each separate piece on a stainless steel platter, beside laminated numbered labels. Will drifts closer. Beverly is like a crow on a battlefield, picking out the eyes of the dead. His eyes.

"Ahh, gotcha!" Beverly says with vicious satisfaction.

Will watches as she extracts a tiny piece of rock from the hollowed out flesh. No… that's not a rock.

Brian who is standing next to Beverly leans closer, tilting his head as he studies what she is holding. Will narrows his eyes and steps even closer. It's not anything like a mineral, although it's milky and white, slick with fluid. It has tiny legs curled up underneath it.

"Looks like the nymph of an Ambush Bug," Brian declares. "Almost an adult. Definitely placed there. They're not parasitic. They eat other bugs."

Not parasitic. Will stares for another moment at the small pale body, imagining what it might look like nestled cozily behind the quartz eye, waiting for Will to find it. Except Will hadn't found it. He hadn't looked properly. He feels an absurd stab of jealousy and has to stop himself from grabbing the tweezers out of Beverly's hand. Instead he watches as she places it in a small container of liquid to arrest any further development, in case it's not dead. Will thinks it looks fairly dead.

"Any insight?" Beverly asks him, her face hopeful.

Will looks at the space where the insect had been. It's not really recognizable as a human body anymore. It hasn't been since the Ripper made his art out of it and hid this insect for him, behind a blank eye of quartz. All he'd needed to do was to remove the eyes to find the secret. Just as the Ripper had removed the original eyes of the victim. But Will had been caught by the stone gaze. Don't be blinded by the glittering facade, there's a killer behind it?

"I'm… not sure," Will says. He turns away.

"Do you think he's lost it?" he hears Brian say to Beverly as he walks away. She shushes him.

***

The dogs are jubilant at the opportunity to run when Will takes them on the long walk past the patch of woods and across the vast field behind it. Eunice runs so far ahead Will can't see her, but he hears her now and then. Winston and Charlie stay close, trotting along one to either side of him, while the rest range back and forth, checking in with him. It's getting dark, but it's not night yet, so he goes the extra loop back around the forest and through the

outskirts of it, coming back in to see his house waiting for him, lamps lit, the way he leaves it when he's coming back.

When they get back to the house, the dogs are tired and Will is hungry. He feeds them before making himself a bowl of cereal. Hannibal would look at him disapprovingly, he's sure. He eats by the window, watching the faintly visible treeline to the west without really seeing it, and goes to bed soon after that.

He's back in the lab, and Beverly is carefully pulling tiny slivers of stone out of the body, one after one. The victim has Will's sweater on, and he can see a familiar mop of curly hair, matted with blood on the head of the body, hanging over the side of the table, its neck broken. Will feels a rising unease, and he comes closer, so he can see the face of the victim. It's his own face, but the eyes are missing, and Will breathes out a sigh of relief. It's so important that he doesn't have any eyes to see with.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Beverly asks, and Will turns around to see her looking at him, her hands bloody, a large splinter of the translucent rock held in her tweezers. He looks down at the body again, and the hollow where the rocks were is seeping blood. It's almost black. Something is moving inside of him. He leans closer to see, and it's a small thing, growing larger, peeking out of the wound. It's the insect, no longer white but slick with dark red blood.

"Are you enjoying your gift?" Beverly asks, but it's not Beverly. The voice sounds different. Will turns away, walks toward the exit, but the door won't cooperate. It's stuck. Not Beverly at all is walking up behind him, and he feels a sense of dread and desperation. In a moment it will all be over.

He wakes up by the door, fumbling with the lock. Winston is nudging his thigh, whining quietly. It takes him a while to get his bearings, but then he sits down, heavily, on the floor. He leans against the door and breathes while Winston licks his sweaty face, and he half-heartedly tries to bat him away. There was something in his dream, something important. But it's gone.

Chapter 4

"I don't know what's wrong with me," Will says. "There's something… something I can't get at." He's on his couch, back to avoiding writing his article.

"Hmm," Hannibal comments. He sounds busy, like he's working with his hands while talking on the phone.

Will drags his hand through his hair. "I'm not sure what to do about it," he says. "It's getting worse. I was sleepwalking last night. Woke up by the door."

"Oh? You've done that before. But not for some time, I think?"

"No, not since my training. But this feels different. I can't remember my dream, but there was a real sense of dread in it. I think… Everything tells me there's something I need to acknowledge." Will might know what it is. If it's his attraction to Doctor Lecter, his subconscious is making a very huge deal of it, but he guesses it's not unthinkable. It feels like it's at least related.

"There are of course methods of getting to the bottom of things our minds are determined to hide from us," Hannibal says. "I have some experience with hypnotherapy, if you'd like to try that."

"I'm not sure. Maybe we can talk about it next week?"

There's no reply. Hannibal must be engrossed in what he's doing. Will tries to imagine what. Maybe drawing, or doing something in his kitchen. He thinks about Hannibal concentrating on some delicate process, steady hands manipulating his subject until it's perfect — art.

"Are you cooking?" Will asks.

"Preparing ingredients," Hannibal says. He sounds a little strained. "Some can be invigoratingly difficult to extract."

"What are you making?" Will asks.

"Something for you, in fact," Hannibal replies, his voice warm.

Oh. Will leans into the corner of the couch harder. He can't stop the smile on his face. That's… "I'm sure I'll enjoy it," he says.

"I'm confident you will," Hannibal tells him. He sounds almost smug. It's unfairly attractive, even over the phone.

***

Will drives in to sit in his office instead of pacing at home. He's been worrying the dogs and it's better if he just leaves them alone for a bit so they can sleep. He goes through the updates on the hunt for Gideon. He doesn't understand why Jack seems so convinced Gideon is the Chesapeake Ripper. There is very little evidence pointing to that if you disregard Doctor Chilton's extensive comments and the timeline. The timeline is the more important thing, but Jack Crawford has always respected Doctor Chilton's opinion in a way that makes Will feel a little nauseated. Will scrolls through the text again. Chilton is almost tripping over himself in his enthusiasm to prove Gideon is the Ripper and his phrasing is… inelegant. Like Gideon himself.

The problem is that Will has no ready alternative to present to Jack. He only has his intangible insight from the evidence he sees. Every time he tries to collect what he knows and what he's seen in order to make a profile for Jack, his thoughts slide away. It's like the Ripper is something other than human. Something that won't be defined. Not by Will, in any case.

Will sits at his desk, listening to doors opening and closing in the distance, faint footsteps and printer noises and voices drifting in from the hallway outside, and wonders how long he's going to do this to himself. He hasn't felt this unsteady in a very long time. He's not sleeping well, he is withholding details of an ongoing investigation that could arguably be of use to Jack in finding the Ripper, and he's participating in unethical flirting with his therapist. He buries his face in his hands and tries to will away the hard clenching of his stomach reminding him he hasn't had breakfast.

***

"I thought, perhaps lunch?" Hannibal is in the doorway to his office. He is holding something covered in his hands and he has that tiny, barely there smile on his face which Will has seen a lot of lately.

"Hannibal!" Will rises quickly, and then has to scramble to keep his laptop from sliding off his desk. He feels a little out of breath, the jolt of adrenaline from reacting to the almost fall of his laptop blooming violently through his body. It makes him tremble, and he moves out from behind the desk and toward Hannibal to shake it off.

"You haven't had lunch yet, have you?" Hannibal asks.

Will stares at him; his neat hair combed just so, his arms and shoulders shown off beautifully by his tailored suit jacket. This man has actually made him lunch and brought it to him.

"No," he says. "I'm so hungry. This is… What did you make me?" He doesn't want to take what Hannibal is carrying out of his hands, so he backs away again, back to his desk to start clearing it of papers and other debris. He closes his laptop and sets it aside, by the window.

"I made a Sacromonte omelet," Hannibal says, following close behind. Will feels his presence like a furnace. He'd like to press himself against that heat, and the fact that he can't makes him feel an almost gravitational pull. Hannibal sets his burden down once Will has made room for him and starts producing plates and cutlery, and the covered omelet itself. It smells fantastic.

"It may have been better hot, but I couldn't wait to serve it to you," Hannibal tells him as they sit down on opposite sides of the desk. It's not wide, and their knees bump together under the makeshift table. Hannibal cuts a piece for Will and a piece for himself, and then adds a few slices of seared fruit from a plastic container. "The recipe is from Andalusia, originally, and utilizes several pieces of the lamb, or the calf. Most often it is prepared with the brain and testicles of the animal. A little bit of marrow."

Will looks at his plate. "I don't think I've had brains before," he says. "Rocky Mountain Oysters once, but not brains."

"No time like the present," Hannibal says and offers him a knife and fork. "Enjoy."

"It's almost sweet," Will says after tasting a bite. His stomach is happy to be fed, and the dish is rich and, as he says, a little sweet on his tongue.

Hannibal watches him eat with something close to adoration in his eyes, and Will is afraid to meet his gaze. He finishes his piece of omelet silently, his knee resting very lightly against Hannibal's under the desk, then happily accepts a second helping.

"I feel our circumstances have changed somewhat," Hannibal says when they've finished their meal. "I don't know if I should continue being your therapist in this situation."

"I don't want a different therapist," Will says, alarmed.

"There are ethical considerations..."

"What about no ethics?" Will interrupts. "Enjoying something with no consideration of morals or ethics."

"For the pure pleasure of it?" Hannibal asks, a tiny smile curling the edges of his mouth. It looks wicked. It makes Will feel like he's said something indecent.

"Yes," he replies.

Hannibal stacks their plates together and collects their cutlery. "I, too, enjoy our talks a great deal," he says. "I would prefer not to go without them."

"Isn't there some way we could keep the best of both worlds? I assume you're worried about what things look like to other people."

"Yes and no," Hannibal says. "It can often be beneficial to keep a veneer, a… veil between you and the world."

"To keep them from watching too closely," Will agrees. "Yes, I just don't bother with it for the most part."

"You don't show all your inner workings to the world, but neither do you make great efforts to deceive people. I agree."

"But you're saying in this case, it may be better to hide."

"There is not yet so much to hide, is there?" Hannibal looks at him fondly. "But I have found that a thorough groundwork of precautions is helpful to maintaining a comfortable life without improper scrutiny. I suggest that we end our professional arrangement, but keep our appointments. I hope to see much more of you than that, in fact."

"I am… curious," Will says. Hannibal seems to have planned out their developing relationship in detail. "But we haven't even kissed. Isn't it a little early to talk about the future?"

"Come see me after work," Hannibal says.

"What?"

"I expect you'll have a busy afternoon. But afterwards, come to my house. I'll make you dinner."

Will eyes him. He's reasonably sure he's just received an invitation for dinner and fucking or, at least, the aforementioned kissing. Hannibal's expression is calm, not particularly stirred by the subject. It makes Will wonder what it would take to ruffle him.

"If my dog sitter is free," Will says. "I hadn't planned to be away."

"Of course," Hannibal says. "If you're able to arrange it. Take the afternoon to consider."

That seems to be the end of it.

***

In the late afternoon there are running footsteps down the corridor outside Will's office, rapidly approaching. "There's been another murder," Jack says, leaning into the room, "I'll need you to come with me to see it."

Something goes still in Will's mind.

"Will?" Jack says, impatient.

"Sure, yeah, coming," Will says, getting himself ready to go on autopilot. There is something like a bank of roiling clouds at the edges of what he's thinking, just waiting to roll in. It's

waiting, though.

Jack asks him on the way if he's seen the latest on Gideon and Will only shakes his head while Jack tells him of narrowing down the possible places he could be hiding, that he has to be close by.

***

"He did a number on the body, but we can see he took the brain and his testicles," Jack says, walking around the dead man on the floor.

"...and a little bit of marrow." Will wants suddenly to cry. He hasn't cried in many, many years.

"Yes," Jack says, glancing up at him. "He can certainly have done that, with the incision on the back. Can you see him do it? Are things clearer now?"

Will holds his hand out to stop him, because he's not sure he can say anything more. The art element he'd always wondered over is… quite clear now. There were no missing art projects. They'd been in full view on a lavish dinner table whenever Hannibal had had guests over. When he'd had *Will* over.

"Do you want some privacy for this?" Jack asks.

Will does. Will wants about two years of privacy for this. He nods.

Jack empties the crime scene for him, but once he's alone with the body it's worse. The violent forcing together of what he thought were two separate people into one in his mind is leaving him trembling. He has trouble simply standing, so he goes over and leans into the wall. He doesn't need to look at the body to know why Hannibal did this. All the parts of it; the planning, the happy crafting of it, the cooking, the *feeding*. Hannibal's hungry eyes as he watched Will eat.

Will groans and turns, pressing his shoulders into the wall so he won't just slide to the floor. He can still feel the tasty rich dish resting inside him. It should be making him queasy. He should probably throw up. He looks back over to the body. Will has parts of this corpse inside him. He's taking nourishment from the organs of this man, and Hannibal has killed him so it could happen.

No, still not throwing up.

He'd been thinking about maybe not going over to Hannibal after this, because he's not exactly relationship material, and even though Hannibal knows more of him than most, he didn't think that was enough. He'd been thinking that way. Does that mean he's thinking about going now?

He makes a noise. It might be a whimper. The thing is. *The thing is*, he may have been the one to cause these murders. The Chesapeake Ripper comeback murders. Because Hannibal likes him. Will had admired his drawings, which looked very very similar to the stone eyes slitted into the body of the last murder and *oh my god*, the Ripper must think he's so dull, can't even see what's right in front of him. No, he'd had to stage another murder, specifically tell Will what he took from the body and then send him out to see it before Will got it.

Will covers his face with his hands and moans. Thinking of it in terms of 'the Ripper did this' produces an entirely different set of emotions in him than 'Hannibal did this'. He's still shaking. He can't seem to stop.

He should stop. Because Jack will be back soon, and Will needs to stop this, right now. He needs to… He needs time.

He walks out of the building. Jack is standing by his car, talking to someone on the phone, but as soon as he sees Will, his eyes narrow and he quickly ends his conversation.

"You look… what is it? Did you see more this time?" He looks desperate for more evidence. Like he'll take anything. It's perfect.

"We need to find the Ripper," Will says. His voice comes out remarkably steady. He still feels shaky, but he needs to do this and do this now.

"I just got a lead for that," Jack says. "So it is Gideon after all?"

"I saw the Ripper, what he did," Will confirms. He's not straight-out lying, although he doubts that will matter in the light of what he's about to do. What he has to do.

Jack gestures to Will to get into the car while calling to the rest of his crew to get to work. Will sees Beverly and Jimmy and the camera guy head back inside as they pull away.

Jack takes him to a complex of buildings neighboring nothing but barren fields of straw, rocks and stunted trees. It's not the kind of landscape Will would expect to see in these parts, but the layout of the buildings makes it clear this was once a factory of some kind. Maybe the land around it is poisoned.

"Do you feel up to this?" Jack asks. "It would be best if we searched from two directions. Doctor Lecter is good at what he does. He says the Ripper will keep to himself, that he's unlikely to have an accomplice. I doubt he's still here, but there may be something he left."

Will looks at the buildings. The Ripper is excellent at getting away with murder. No doubt he is also excellent at framing people for it. Will is just amazed at the level of gambling Hannibal is doing. These are high stakes indeed. Jack is staring at him again.

"Yes, two directions. That sounds good," Will says. But where will Hannibal have put Abel Gideon, if he's set it up the way Will is becoming more and more sure he has? There's no way to know. "Fine. Yes."

Will gets out of the car, checking his service weapon. He starts toward a side entrance he can see. In his eagerness to get this done, Jack doesn't even bother to give him any further instructions. Amazing. Instead Jack just goes the other way, to the next building. Will shrugs, walking up to the door. If Hannibal is gambling, so will he.

The door is unlocked, the interior unlit. Will waits inside until the dim light from the windows is enough to navigate by, then quickly moves through the building, looking for what he needs. He keeps his weapon ready. He can smell old blood.

Doctor Frederick Chilton is in the third section of what looks like a machine hall. He's on the floor, obviously drugged to the gills. Will pauses. Blinks. The floor is littered with human organs, body parts and blood. Some of it looks days old. Abel Gideon's head is resting on a chair. There's a half-full plastic jug of blood by the wall, its contents slopped around, some of it even saturating Doctor Chilton's clothes. There's half a brain lying there next to him. And a gun, right there, on the floor, next to his hand. Will doesn't doubt it already has Chilton's fingerprints on it. Perfectly set up, just waiting. For him.

Will hasn't used his gun in relation to a person in years. He's never killed anyone with it. He's never killed anyone, period. He's lived in the minds of hundreds of killers, though, and he knows what they've felt, doing it. Briefly, he wonders what kind of killer he'll be as himself.

He stands above Chilton and raises his gun. He needs to fix his angles. "FBI!" he shouts. "Drop your weapon!"

Doctor Chilton groans awake and struggles to rise up to his knees. He doesn't quite manage. His head is off the floor, though. Will shoots him.

The bullet hits Chilton in the collarbone. He shouts and lists to the side before struggling to rise, to get away, his body suddenly more cooperative. That's not good. Will steps forward, shoots again, and this time the bullet hits near Chilton's jaw and he screams, the sound of it quickly morphing around the gush of blood. Will keeps shooting until Chilton stops making noise. He's standing over the body, his gun a dead weight hanging from his fingers when Jack comes rushing in.

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The entire car ride back, Will has a hard time deciding what he should be feeling. He did what he set out to do. Or maybe it was what Hannibal set out to have him do. Or what Hannibal gambled he would do. He's elated, or numb, or shaking with fear.

Jack seems ill at ease, as if his worldview has changed. Will can empathize. Hannibal would have said that with a straight face, he'd bet, but even thinking it makes Will's lips twitch with aborted grinning. Jack glances at him uneasily but doesn't say anything. The Chesapeake Ripper is dead, though, even if he wasn't who Jack had been expecting, and Will thinks Jack will have to be satisfied with that.

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Will doesn't wash the blood from his face when he gets back to Quantico. Instead he goes straight to his car, waving off hesitant concern with the assurance that he has an appointment with Doctor Lecter. He tries not to think too much as he drives. It's possible that he shouldn't be driving, but he'll have to risk it. He needs to get to Baltimore. It's the inevitable end to the path he started on when he agreed to look at the Ripper's crime scene. No, before that. When he met Hannibal, and refused to look at a crime scene. Or maybe even before that, when he first understood just how differently his mind worked from everyone else's.

He makes himself call the agency that checks on his dogs when he's away. They already have a key, and fortunately an employee is available to take the job. He tells them he may be away for a couple of days and to get in touch with him the day after tomorrow if he doesn't call. That should guarantee the dogs will be taken care of, even if Will disappears. He finds he can't dredge up enough feeling to care about whether the Ripper will kill him or not.

Standing on Hannibal's doorstep, he does feel a last impulse to take out his phone, call Jack and tell him everything. It would mean that Will himself would be charged with murder, and there's no guarantee that Doctor Lecter would be implied at all in any criminal activity, but possibly it would be worth it. Then the door opens, and it's too late. It's always been too late.

Hannibal looks him up and down for what feels like an eternity, a tiny warm smile on his face. "Please, come in, Will," he finally says. "I'm still cooking. Perhaps you would like to join me in the kitchen?"

Will steps inside. It's a relief to fall back into a pattern he knows, even if the undercurrents of their interactions are vastly different. Or maybe they're not — not from Hannibal's side anyway. Hannibal parks him at an unused counter, pours him a glass of wine and calmly goes back to stirring one of the pots on the stove. Will is so tired. All of his focus had been on getting here, and now that the road has come to an end, there are no more flags showing him the way. He is standing in the kitchen of the Chesapeake Ripper, watching him make dinner like an ordinary man. He has killed to get here.

"There is a stool behind you," Hannibal says.

Will looks, and there is a bar stool which he pulls closer and seats himself in. He hadn't noticed how weak his legs had been, but it's such a relief to sit. "Thank you," he says.

"How was your afternoon?" Hannibal asks conversationally.

Will stares at his back. He is still fiddling with whatever is cooking — it smells good, comforting — and is to all appearances completely unaware that anything is out of the ordinary. Will feels envious of his acting skills. They are impeccable.

"Eventful," he answers. If Hannibal wants to draw this out with witty repartee, Will won't be able to contribute much. Today has been a rollercoaster cresting in setting a man up for a great many murders by way of shooting him in the face. Will keeps coming back to that, then edging away carefully. He's not sure what to feel about it.

"I can imagine," Hannibal comments. Will is sure he can. Today has been a detailed map with a marked trail for him to follow.

"We solved the case," he offers, leaning on the counter, his elbows propping up the rest of him. He studies his fingernails. His hands still have some dried blood on them.

"Oh?" Hannibal sounds mildly curious.

"Yeah. It was Doctor Chilton all along."

"Is that so."

Will picks his glass of wine up, very carefully to make sure he won't spill it. It's a burst of deep flavor on his tongue, almost chasing away the taste of blood that's been there since he shot Chilton. They'd made him leave his weapon for analysis.

"Yes," he says after swallowing and putting the glass back down. "Jack wasn't happy."

"And you, Will?" Hannibal turns and watches him. "Were you happy?"

"Happy?" Will looks at Hannibal. His eyes give away nothing and Will suddenly feels helpless how to proceed. "I don't know what I am, Doctor Lecter," he says. "I am having trouble reconciling the image of the man with that of the monster."

"I would suggest roaming your own inner landscape," Hannibal says. "The answer might be closer than you'd think."

Will feels himself start to tremble again, his breathing hitching once, twice. He can only stare, the situation all at once impossible and overwhelming. Hannibal is the Chesapeake Ripper, author of the most perfect murders Will has ever seen, and he's standing in front of him, telling him to look inside himself as if Will could be anything like him.

"I can't," he chokes out.

Hannibal comes closer, slow, as if not to spook him. He reaches out his hand and Will doesn't have the energy to flinch from it even if he wanted to. But Hannibal doesn't hurt him. He steps in close and pulls Will closer, until their bodies are leaning against one another and Will's face is against Hannibal's neck.

Will relaxes in stages, his body jerking minutely with each transition. Hannibal is warm and smells of male and the kitchen.

"You rare, precious boy," Hannibal tells him. "You did everything just beautifully right."

Will almost does cry at that. He tilts his head up instead. "Hannibal," he says, pleading. He doesn't know what he'll do if this is denied him, but Hannibal isn't so cruel, not with this. His mouth is hot on Will's, the wetness of it electric. It makes Will jerk and shiver, exhausted but burning with want and bliss. When Hannibal tries to go back to the stove, Will clings to him, and in the end they stand over the pots together, Hannibal's arm around Will as he stirs and adjusts the heat, competent even with one hand.

"So you have considered, over the afternoon, and decided in favor of more time spent together, I gather," Hannibal says.

"I think I wasn't going to," Will mumbles and leans harder into Hannibal.

"No?" Hannibal asks.

"I thought I was too fucked up for you."

"And your thoughts now?" Hannibal sounds amused.

Will feels a burst of something undefinable. "I think," he says, "that if you wanted me, you have me now."

"I do," Hannibal says. It sounds strangely solemn, like a promise. "And if you are recovered enough, this is ready to serve. Are you hungry?"

There are probably pieces of Abel Gideon in this meal, Will knows. But Hannibal always makes delicious food, and this will be no different. "Yes," he says. "Very hungry."

"Then set the table, dear boy."

End Notes

I love Will Finds Out stories, and I really wanted to write one. So I did! I moved canon around a bit and skipped the encephalitis. Hopefully you guys enjoy that kind of AU.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!